



## Wine tourism experience: A netnography study

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### ABSTRACT

Wine tourism is a growing activity, contributing to the economic development of wine regions. The main objective of this study is to thoroughly examine the wine tourism experience using the experience economy model (4Es). Netnography was selected as a research method. This study considers 825 original reviews posted on TripAdvisor by tourists who visited Cognac (France). The results show that the experiences are globally positive. Among the four dimensions of the conceptual framework, the experiences related to education and entertainment dimensions are predominant. Theoretically, the 4Es model related to the wine tourism experience has been enriched. Furthermore, the research highlights the relevance of the holistic analysis and “sweet spot” concept of the 4Es model. From a managerial perspective, the absorption side of the experience - either active or passive requires reinforcement by an immersive experience to offer a “sweet spot” to potential visitors.

### 1. Introduction

Wine tourism is classified as a form of special interest tourism (Hall et al., 2000) comprising visits to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals, and wine shows in wine tourism destinations (Hall & Macionis, 1998). Marzo-Navarro and Pedraja-Iglesias (2010) add other aspects to this definition, such as local attractions or experiencing the lifestyle of the local people, for example, staying overnight at the vineyards. Wine tourism is a growing activity contributing to the economic development of wine regions (Molina, Gomez, Gonzalez-Diaz, & Esteban, 2015), and a complementary vector between the wine production industry and the tourism sector (Hojman & Hunter-Jones, 2012). In France, wine regions are major tourist destinations. In 2016, 10 million wine tourists visited these destinations, representing 5.2 billion EUR in terms of expenditure. For 2009 to 2016, the average growth rate of wine tourists visiting French wine destinations was 33%. Hence, the average annual growth rate of foreign wine tourists is 5% compared to French tourists at 3.7% (Atout France, 2017).

Recently, the dynamic development of wine tourism has contributed to building a strong brand image for wine destinations and intensifying the competition between them. To improve their attractiveness and competitiveness, destination managers promote satisfactory experiences to form a subsequent customer attachment to place-based brands while visiting a destination (Orth et al., 2012).

From an academic point of view, studies on wine tourism appeared during 1990–2000 (Getz, 2000; Mitchell & Hall, 2006). Studies often address three themes: destinations' strategies, actors in the wine

tourism industry, and wine tourists' behaviors. The first research stream examines the initiatives related to promoting a wine tourism destination, the costs and benefits incurred by this activity, and its consequences on destination image (Hojman & Hunter-Jones, 2012). The second focuses on wine producers' tourism strategies (Dawson, Holmes, Jacobs, & Wade, 2011). The third investigates wine tourists' behavior and motivations for choosing a wine destination (Carlsen & Boksberger, 2015).

More recently, researchers looked into the experiential dimension of wine tourism (e.g., Carmichael, 2005; Cohen & Ben-Nun, 2009; Pikkemaat, Peters, Boksberger, & Secco, 2009; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012, 2013). In tourism marketing research, the experiential dimension is placed at the center of tourism consumption. Tourism experience has become a central concept for both practitioners and academics (Bosangit, Hibbert, & McCabe, 2015). Essentially, studies give particular attention to research on nature, dimensions, and the role of the tourism experience. This research interest is entirely justified because the tourism industry is a business that sells experiences (Kim, 2010). Time dedicated to leisure is precisely that, allowing tourists to live new and different experiences compared to their everyday life. Moreover, the experiential view redefines the roles of tourism professionals and tourists by considering the tourist as a fully-fledged actor in the production of his or her own experience. Wine tourism traditionally emphasizes senses, emotions, and enjoyment of pastoral settings; thus, the expanding body of customer experience literature, while still evolving, affords a logical connection to wine tourism (Bruwer & Alant, 2009; Carmichael, 2005; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012).

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While most current studies focus on the visitor's experience in a winery, a wine route, or an event related to wine (e.g., Carmichael, 2005; Pikkemaat et al., 2009), this study takes a more global approach at the level of a wine tourism destination to examine wine tourists' experiences. Indeed, wine tourists desire quality culinary offerings; attractions, including cultural, recreational, and retail choices; human interactions; and a wine region landscape to enjoy (Bruwer & Alant, 2009; Carmichael, 2005; Cohen & Ben-Nun, 2009; Dawson et al., 2011). In addition, the motivations for choosing a wine region as a tourist destination go beyond a simple desire to experience wine (Cohen & Ben-Nun, 2009). This suggests interrelated activities within the overall wine tourism experience (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). However, little wine tourism research addresses this type of global approach. Research to date has yet to take a holistic approach to understand the nature of the wine tourist experience (Beames, 2003). Thereby, from a holistic perspective, this research focuses on the tourists' experience in relation to activities and places dedicated to wine tourism. The research question is as follows: What are the dimensions of the wine tourism experience that drive focal marketing strategies of wine tourism destination stakeholders?

## 2. Literature review

Tourism experiences are no longer an optional added value but a mandatory benefit of any tourism offer (Larsen, 2007). As Pine and Gilmore (1999) indicate, it is of utmost importance to create memorable experiences. In line with these remarks, wine tourism researchers recently focus particular attention to customer experience or hedonic consumption (e.g., Bruwer & Alant, 2009; Cohen & Ben-Nun, 2009; Pikkemaat et al., 2009; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). Hedonic consumption, in contrast to utilitarian consumption, concentrates on the intrinsic value of “feelings, fun, and fantasy” fostered by the experience (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The proliferation of literature on the consumer experience signifies the relevance of this theoretical framework to understand the experiences consumers seek in general (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 1999), and wine tourists in particular (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012, 2013). Indeed, Charters (2006, p. 214) points out that wine tourists seek an experience that “is a complex interaction of natural setting, wine, food, cultural, and historical inputs and above all, the people who service them.”

Among the experience models, Pine and Gilmore's (1998, 1999) experience economy model stands out through operational design. This experience economy model has four dimensions called the 4Es (i.e., the educational, esthetic, entertainment, and escapist experiences), and recently gained attention among wine tourism researchers (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012, 2013). The 4Es model has been suggested as appropriate for understanding tourism products such as hotels and restaurants (Gilmore & Pine, 2002), special events (Pullman & Gross, 2003), and heritage trails (Hayes & MacLeod, 2007). In fact, the 4Es model was successfully operationalized by Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung (2007) in a bed and breakfast setting, by Hosany and Witham (2010) in the cruise environment, and recently by Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2013) in the wine tourism context. Furthermore, Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012, 2013) recognize that the 4Es model offers a relevant framework to examine the wine tourism experience. To support the need for a more encompassing view of the experiential nature of wine tourism using the 4Es model, these authors successfully provide evidence for the use of one of the constructs of the 4Es model in 30 previous wine tourism studies.

Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) conceptualize the multi-dimensional nature of consumer experience and position the resulting 4Es in quadrants formed by the intersection of two continua of experience: consumer participation (active or passive) along the horizontal axis and consumer connection (absorption or immersion) along the vertical axis (Fig. 1). Active participation is “where customers personally affect the performance or event,” and passive participation is “where customers

do not directly affect or influence the performance” (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 30). Immersion is described as becoming physically or virtually part of the event, performance, or environment, whereas absorption involves engaging the consumer's mind (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999).

In particular, the richest experiences are those encompassing aspects of all four realms, forming a “sweet spot” that balances elements of active and passive consumer participation and in which customers are both absorbed and immersed (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Indeed, according to Oh et al. (2007) each realm itself is unique and greatly contributes to the global destination experience, with an ideal combination of aspects of all four realms leading to an optimal tourist experience.

### 2.1. Educational experience in wine tourism

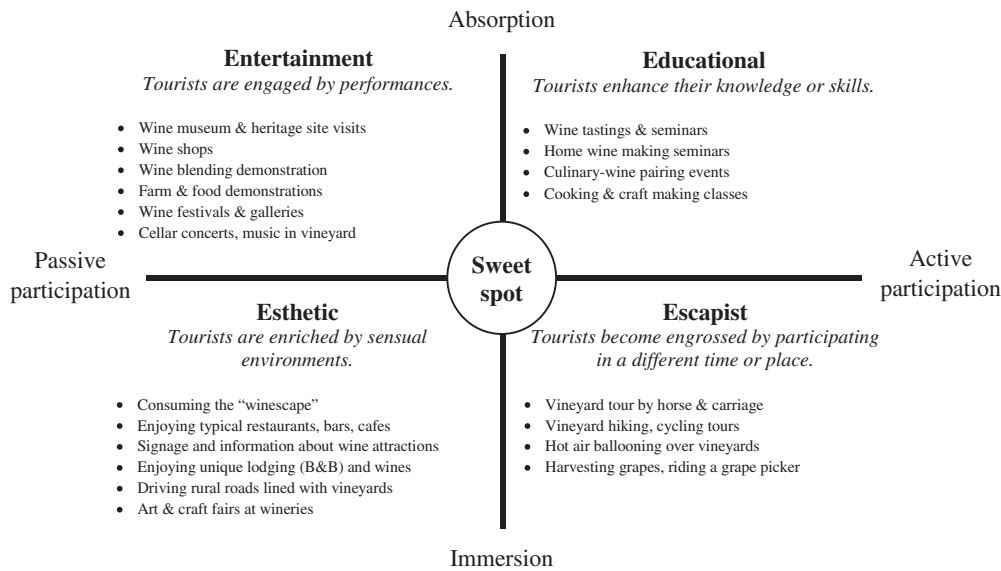
Education repeatedly appears as one of the main motivations in the wine tourism research literature (Getz & Carlsen, 2008). Personal development was identified as a key attribute desired by wine tourists (Sparks, 2007). Although learning was less important to repeat visitors than first-time visitors to South African wineries, it remained one of the top five motivating factors (Bruwer & Alant, 2009). Educational experience plays a significant role in creating memories and satisfaction (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). The wine tourism supply chain includes accommodation, culinary, cultural, and recreational activities - all of which may offer an educational component. The most common educational activity is wine tasting, followed by wine-food pairing events at local restaurants. Some wineries offer home wine making seminars and partner with chefs and farmers to offer culinary classes (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). Additionally, festivals, wine history (wine museums), and galleries (whether retail or exhibition) serve as both an educational and entertainment element (Mitchell & Hall, 2006; Pikkemaat et al., 2009; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). However, agreeing with the Quadri-Felitti and Fiore's (2012) classification, we classify wine history (wine museum) as an entertainment experience in line with the degree of consumer participation and connection depicted in the 4Es model of the experience economy. Moreover, based on the same remark and agreeing with some authors (e.g., Axelsen & Swan, 2010; Getz & Brown, 2006), we classify wine festivals and galleries in the entertainment category.

### 2.2. Entertainment experience in wine tourism

Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2013) state that special events occurring in wine destinations are another inducement for wine tourists. Cultural attractions and events within wine destinations are a considerable draw for tourists (Carmichael, 2005) and may intensify tourists' entertainment experience (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). Wine and food festivals and shows are central elements to entertain attendees (Axelsen & Swan, 2010). The connection of art, music, and cultural heritage as entertainment within wine destinations is well documented (Charters, 2006). According to Getz and Brown (2006), numerous specialty shops (e.g., wine shops) within wine destinations are also an excellent entertainment element.

### 2.3. Esthetic experience in wine tourism

The esthetic experience refers to immersion in a sensual environment. Tourists are passive in esthetic experiences, but immersed in the wine tourism experience (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2013) demonstrate the dominance of the esthetic experience in predicting positive memories and destination loyalty in the wine tourism context. The winescape – the cultural, environmental, and human improvements of the wine landscape – reflects wine tourists' esthetic motivation (Bruwer & Alant, 2009; Carmichael, 2005; Cohen & Ben-Nun, 2009). The beauty of the winescape, vineyards,



**Fig. 1.** Theoretical framework for understanding the wine tourism experience. Source: Adapted from Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012, p. 8).

picturesque main streets, and typical architecture provide tourists with excellent esthetic experiences (Urry, 1995). Driving along rural roads lined with vineyards and orchards is a typical consumption activity for excursionists spending a day in a wine region (Getz & Brown, 2006). Enjoying wines and typical places such as accommodation, restaurants, cafes, and so on in relation to wine is an esthetic experience within wine destinations (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). Signage and information about wine attractions also contribute to tourists' esthetic experience (Pikkemaat et al., 2009). Nevertheless, Quadri-Felitti and Fiore's (2012) framework does not consider these elements.

#### 2.4. Escapist experience in wine tourism

The escapist dimension refers to seeking experiences that differ from tourists' daily experiences. In other words, tourists attempt to escape daily reality during their holidays in wine destinations. While wine tourists may gaze at a winescape, gaining an esthetic experience, they may also engage in various recreational options typically available in wine destinations (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). Wine destinations provide numerous activities that tourists may participate in, ranging from hot air ballooning and bicycle tours, vineyard hiking to vineyard tours by horse and carriage, riding a grape picker, and grape stomping and harvesting (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). These participatory and immersive activities are noted as reasons to visit wine destinations (Sparks, 2007). In the wine tourism literature, the findings in relation to the escapist construct confirm that tourists want more to do than just visit wineries and taste wine (Beames, 2003; Cohen & Ben-Nun, 2009).

#### 2.5. Richest experience in wine tourism

In the wine tourism context, the "sweet spot" can be reached when tourists are satisfied with different variables from various dimensions. For example, to offer a "sweet spot" to potential tourists, wine tasting (educational dimension) can be combined with wine blending demonstrations (entertainment dimension), and consuming the winescape (esthetic dimension) through a vineyard hike (escapist dimension), among others. However, the literature review shows that there are no prior studies related to the wine tourism experience using the "sweet spot" concept. Focusing on the bed-and-breakfast industry, Oh et al. (2007) explored the empirical viability of the "sweet spot" construct, but the result did not validate the existence of an optimal experience.

Given that managers of wine destinations could offer potential tourists the richest experiences through the various wine tourism

activities proposed, understanding the concept of the "sweet spot" can help enhance customer value in wine tourism (Carlsen & Boksberger, 2015). Additionally, Hojman and Hunter-Jones (2012) underline the heterogeneities in the demand and supply side of wine tourism. Discussing the "sweet spot" concept from the wine consumer's perspective helps to provide a deeper understanding of the key attributes of the wine tourism experience.

To answer the research question, the analysis is built on a double reading. On the one hand, this study adopts a global analysis at the wine tourism destination level to examine the wine tourism experience. On the other hand, the analysis has as an objective to put forward aspects of all four realms that can provide the richest experience.

Based on the recent literature on wine tourism experience above and Quadri-Felitti and Fiore's (2012) framework, we propose a revised framework (Fig. 1) for understanding the global experience of wine tourism. Consequently, this revised framework serves as a theoretical framework to analyze wine tourists' experiences. We add two additional items, "wine shops" and "wine festivals and galleries," to the entertainment dimension. Furthermore, we enriched the esthetic dimension by adding "enjoying typical restaurants, bars, cafes" and "signage and information about wine attractions."

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1. Choice of study site

In France, a country with a great wine-making tradition, wine tourism is initially considered as a complementary activity for wine, cognac, and champagne producers who open their doors to visitors - amateurs of wine - for discovering their products, savoir-faire, brands, and historical heritage. Hence, wine tourism constitutes one of the communication and distribution vectors of their products.

The wine tourism experience in Cognac, France is appropriate for this research because Cognac is a well-known international brand. The Cognac Delimited Region is situated in the north of Bordeaux, in the Aquitaine basin, bordering the Atlantic Ocean. The region has a rich and long tradition in wine tourism. Consumers can enjoy various wine tourism attractions such as cognac museums, cellars, festivals, distilleries, and cognac houses. In spite of being one of the best-known wine destinations in the world, in comparison to the research interest in other wine destinations in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, or Spain (e.g., Gomez, Molina, & Esteban, 2013), to date, there is no research in the city of Cognac in order to understand the wine tourism

experience.

### 3.2. Netnography method justification

To better understand the wine tourism experience and to answer the research question, we adopt a qualitative research approach, which is more appropriate when the research question is exploratory and when there is a need for a deeper description and explanation of a multifaceted phenomenon. The experience economy framework was previously tested and confirmed in quantitative studies that deal with tourism issues (Oh et al., 2007; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). However, according to Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012), qualitative research methods may be developed to enrich the theoretical knowledge of the experience economy within another destination-specific tourist context. A qualitative design can improve our understanding and provide a more meaningful analysis of all components of the wine tourism experience.

To operationalize the study, we selected netnography as a research technique. Netnography analysis is based on the collection of consumers' reviews containing detailed information about their experiences published on the Internet. Compared to other qualitative research techniques, the distinctive value of netnography is that it excels at telling the story, understanding complex social phenomena, and assists the researcher in developing themes from the consumers' points of view (Kozinets, 2002; Rageh, Melewar, & Woodside, 2013). The typical methodologies to research experiences, such as observation, interviews, and focus groups, have a number of drawbacks, such as respondent reticence and taking a lot more time (Rageh et al., 2013). With these traditional methods, the researchers' presence affects and interrupts the natural, normal practices of everyday life. Therefore, netnography is faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic, objective, and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews (Kozinets, 2002; Wu & Pearce, 2014).

The analysis of the qualitative data posted by tourists on the Internet can play an important role in improving our understanding of the tourist experience, destination brand, destination image formation, and structural and cultural changes in tourism markets (Bosangit et al., 2015; Hsu, Dehuang, & Woodside, 2009; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Rageh et al., 2013; Wu & Pearce, 2014). In addition, the active use of new technologies and social media both by tourists and tourism professionals opens new perspectives to study the tourism experience (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Tourists increasingly use social networks at different stages of the tourist experience, either to prepare their trip or to share their impressions during or after their visit. Furthermore, previous studies show that travelers trust online reviews shared by other tourists more than the online advertising by the tourist industry (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015). Even if netnography is particularly suited to the analysis of the wine tourism experience, the literature reveals that to date, there is no study on wine tourism using netnography as a research method.

### 3.3. Data collection

We adapt Kozinets' (2002) netnography procedure to the wine tourism sector context. The first step involves identifying the online communities most relevant to study the wine tourist experience. We decided to select online reviews posted on one of the world's largest travel-related websites, TripAdvisor, and relative to the Cognac region in France as a wine tourism destination. Wine tourism experience in Cognac benefits with a high number of reviews and a large number of discrete message reviewers. When data were selected in August 2016, there were 5552 reviews on the TripAdvisor page for Cognac. Following Kozinets's (2002) recommendations, we followed the definition of wine tourism suggested by Hall et al. (2000) and asserted by Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012) to select a relevant segment in line with our research question. We then carefully chose only postings related to "Visitations to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals, and wine shows for which grape

wine tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a grape wine region are the primary motivating factors for visitors." In line with the previous definition, 979 reviews related to wine tourism experience posted from March 2011 to August 2016 were selected. To improve the reliability of the data collected, we rejected postings with no mention of the geographic origin of the tourist and those in languages other than French or English. We focus on reviews in French or English because the authors do not practice other languages. In addition, TripAdvisor's automatic translation is not relevant. In order to have an evaluative and holistic view of a wine tourism experience, we preferred online reviews over blogs, and we excluded reviews less than 50 words long. We note that 10% of the sample reviews exceeded 400 words. The final data corpus consists of 825 original reviews.

### 3.4. Data analysis

To analyze the sample, we first developed a dictionary of themes based on the revised 4Es model. We study the corpus by thematic content analysis with the QSR NVivo 10 software, which allows us to perform a precise thematic categorization using predefined themes, and when necessary, we integrate themes emerging from the field data. We ensured uniformity of the coding process through two authors in order to maintain the quality of the research design. The two authors coded 100 consumer reviews together until reaching agreement on the coding procedure. Each author coded 725 opinions independently. The final encoding results were compared through QSR NVivo 10 software. The overall rate of agreement was 87%. The encoding differences were discussed to reach a consensus.

## 4. Results

Among the four dimensions in the conceptual framework, the experiences related to education and entertainment dimensions are predominant, including 840 and 812 coded items, respectively (called references in the QSR NVivo 10 software). With 177 references, the esthetic dimension is under-represented compared to the entertainment and education dimensions. Additionally, very few references are related to the escapist dimension (6 references). Among the 825 reviews, 1835 references are associated with one of the four dimensions of the wine tourism experience. On average, each review concerns 2.22 sub-dimensions. The analysis shows that most of the experiences are positive. Only 8% of the references are related to negative experiences (Table 1).

### 4.1. Results by type of dimension

Nearly 46% of the references fall under the educational dimension. Among them, three sub-dimensions stand out: guide and reception staff with 390 references, wine tasting with 304 references, and wine making workshops (making his or her own cognac) with 117 references (Table 1). Note that the guide and reception staff sub-dimension appears after verbatim analysis. This sub-dimension is categorized in the educational dimension because it is in line with the philosophy of the second quadrant (active participation and absorption). The results confirm the relevance of two sub-dimensions (wine tasting and wine making workshop) already highlighted in the literature on wine tourism experiences.

With over 44% of the references, the entertainment dimension mainly concerns two sub-dimensions: wine museums and heritage site visits with 621 references, and service and product prices with 129 references. The sub-dimension "wine museum and heritage site visits" is the most represented in the verbatim, with over 76% of references related to the entertainment dimension. The literature already identifies this sub-dimension, while the "service and product prices" sub-dimension emerges from the verbatim analysis. The latter is integrated in the first quadrant because it comes more under absorption than immersion, and visitors are not involved in the pricing.

**Table 1**  
References distribution.

Dimensions	Positive references	% of total (*)	Negative references	% of total (*)	Neutral references	% of total (*)	Total (*)	%	Total (*) / total of references
Educational	791	94,17%	46	5,48%	3	0,36%	840	100,00%	45,78%
Guide and front office role	359	92,05%	30	7,69%	1	0,26%	390	46,43%	
Wine tastings & seminars	289	95,07%	14	4,61%	1	0,33%	304	36,19%	
Home wine making seminars	116	99,15%	1	0,85%	0	0,00%	117	13,93%	
Culinary-wine pairing events	26	92,86%	1	3,57%	1	3,57%	28	3,33%	
Cooking & craft making classes	1	100,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	0,12%	
Entertainment	712	87,68%	86	10,59%	14	1,72%	812	100,00%	44,25%
Wine museum & heritage site visits	573	92,27%	37	5,96%	11	1,77%	621	76,48%	
Service or product prices	80	62,02%	46	35,66%	3	2,33%	129	15,89%	
Wine shops	34	91,89%	3	8,11%	0	0,00%	37	4,56%	
Wine blending demonstrations	13	100,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	13	1,60%	
Farm & food demonstrations	7	100,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	7	0,86%	
Wine festivals & galleries	3	100,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	3	0,37%	
Cellar concerts, music in vineyards	2	100,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	2	0,25%	
Esthetic	159	89,83%	18	10,17%	0	0,00%	177	100,00%	9,65%
Consuming the “winescape”	69	98,57%	1	1,43%	0	0,00%	70	39,55%	
Typical architecture related to wineries	65	97,01%	2	2,99%	0	0,00%	67	37,85%	
Enjoying typical restaurants, bars, cafes	18	94,74%	1	5,26%	0	0,00%	19	10,73%	
Signage and information about wine attractions	5	27,78%	13	72,22%	0	0,00%	18	10,17%	
Enjoying unique lodging (B & B) and wines	0	0,00%	1	100,00%	0	0,00%	1	0,56%	
Driving rural roads lined with vineyards	1	100,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	0,56%	
Art & craft fairs at wineries	1	100,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	0,56%	
Escapist	6	100,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	6	100,00%	0,33%
Vineyard tour by horse & carriage	6	100,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	6	100,00%	
Vineyard hiking, cycling tours	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	
Hot air ballooning over vineyards	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	
Harvesting grapes, riding a grape picker	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	
Total	1668	90,90%	150	8,17%	17	0,93%	1835	100,00%	100,00%

With nearly 10% of the references, the esthetic dimension is mainly represented by two sub-dimensions: consuming the “winescape” with 70 references and “enjoying typical wineries, restaurants, bars, cafes” with 67 references. While the consuming the “winescape” sub-dimension is always accounted for in earlier works, the “enjoying typical wineries, restaurants, bars, cafes” sub-dimension is new, and emerges from the verbatim analysis. We put this sub-dimension in the fourth quadrant because of its esthetic character.

The escapist dimension is not significant in the context of wine tourism offerings in Cognac, with only 6 references, all of which concern the “vineyard tour by horse and carriage.”

#### 4.2. Results by experiences' valence

All references related to the wine tourism experience are categorized according to their valence: positive, negative, or neutral. Overall, the experiences related to the education dimension are positive. The visitors expressed themselves in a positive way vis-à-vis three sub-dimensions: guide and reception staff, wine tasting, and wine making workshop (making his or her own cognac). To illustrate, wine tourists appreciated the roles of both the guides and reception staff; 92% of the references are positive:

*“Wonderful experience! The Camus Cognac tour was an added tour with our Bordeaux Viking Cruise. This was our first time in the Cognac region for my husband and myself. Our guide and everyone on the Camus staff were helpful and made the experience fun and educational...”*

(KWSherry, 05/29/2014)

As for tasting, 95% of the references are positive. Visitors particularly enjoyed the tasting combined with a detailed explanation of the product's taste characteristics, the associations, and the consumption

occasions:

*“...We first tasted a cognac that was purposely cooled and could be served as an aperitif. Then came the VSOP and a special creation by the Chef of the Remy Martin House, who purposely came that morning to prepare these amazing treats, without which the tasting would not be the same. We finished the tasting with the XO and another two small plates of Foie gras and dessert, simply amazing...”*

(Happyogini, 11/13/2011)

Cognac making workshops that were offered only by Camus House were highly appreciated: 100% of the references are positive. They particularly valued the active participation and the ability to personalize their experience:

*“Work with a Master Blender. For an enjoyable and more personal alternative to some other Cognac houses, visit Camus, where you can not only taste their cognacs, but learn how to blend your own special XO with the services of their Master Blender. The entire experience is first rate...”*

(Aurelie, 06/20/2015)

Cognac-making workshops may also provide visitors with a certain pride vis-à-vis their guests with whom they taste their own cognac at party occasions:

*“What a treat! We visited Camus in July and it was the favorite part of our trip. Other tours were wonderful, but learning about cognac, and blending and bottling our own was a special experience filled with fun and humor as well. We'll be able to taste our blends about Christmas and with guests, it will be exciting.”*

(931babydol, 09/11/2015)

Within the entertainment dimension, wine museums and heritage site visits are generally perceived as positive, with 92% positive

references. Wine tourists particularly appreciated the wide variety of heritage sites. They relate positive experiences in museums, cellars, castles, and Cognac houses, as well as in discovery areas:

*“A real winter warmer. The modern renovation of the building makes a bright and airy backdrop to the history of turning the grape to the beautiful golden liquid (that is not available to drink here). A mix of static displays, small and large screen presentations brings the whole process alive...”*

(KTS\_trip, 03/09/2013)

Regarding the esthetic dimension, two main sub-dimensions helped to enrich visitors' experiences: consuming the winescape and enjoying typical wineries, restaurants, bars, and cafes. Regarding consuming the winescape, more than 98% of the references are positive. These references mainly concern esthetic appreciation, such as crossing the Charente River proposed by Hennessy and visits to the domain by train through, among others, the vineyards proposed by Rémy Martin:

*“...The Remy Martin House is set up on a quaint little vineyard just outside of town. Not only you are able to tour the caves, cellars, and the House itself, but also I personally enjoyed the train ride through the vineyards...”*

(Lauren W, 10/08/2011)

Among the references related to enjoying typical wineries, restaurants, bars, and cafes, 97% are positive. Visitors appreciate the old buildings full of history and related to cognac manufacturing:

*“...You get to see the main body of the Chateau and then the cellars where there is graffiti from prisoners dated back to the 1800s...”*

(jrapeter, 09/13/2012)

Finally, the escapist dimension is very under-represented. Just 6 positive references relate to only one sub-dimension, vineyard tours by horse and carriage:

*“...It is nearly impossible to describe how important our guide Sebastien was for us... during our stay in Cognac... Sebastien handled everything in a perfect professional way. He was there at the time agreed and he guided us to places we never would have found on our own. ... the guided tour was very personal...”*

(Norway, 05/01/2015)

The verbatim analysis also revealed that a certain number of sub-dimensions contain a high proportion of negative references. In concrete terms, two sub-dimensions have a significant weight of negative references: signage and information about wine attractions (72.22%), and service and product prices (35.66%) (Table 1). Regarding the former, visitors expressed a negative experience about the visit places, the coordination between various actors, and the providers' websites:

*“We were slightly late in arriving having missed the signs to Remy Martin - could do with more prominent signs at the junction from the Pons to Cognac Road...”*

(ChambersInc, 07/02/2015)

*“The tourist office gave us some misinformation about tours for a Sunday but fortunately for us the Trafalgar tour group allowed us to tag along on their tour...”*

(Helen R, 10/13/2013)

*“I read up on the website that from December 1, 2014, the guided tours and visitors' center will be temporarily closed due to renovations and that the official reopening is planned for June 2015. So, we rocked up on 29 July after driving for 2 hours to find that it was all closed until September 2015...”* (sunflower0202, 08/02/2015).

The service and product prices are objects of mixed experiences. An important part of the negative references mainly concerns the price of cognacs in the shops of Cognac houses:

*“For the tourist only. Nice introduction to house of Hennessy but simple*

*information for connoisseur. Pricey when nearby stores have better range and value...”*

(Flynnwales2, 06/27/2012)

#### 4.3. Results related to the richest experience

This section aims to explore whether a “sweet spot” potentially exists in wine tourist experiences. A “sweet spot” comprises at least one item representing each of the four dimensions. In the present study, QSR NVivo 10 identified only one review that included references corresponding to all four dimensions (superposition of QSR NVivo 10 software coding stripes). As Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggest, the universe of possible experiences is vast. In the specific case of wine tourism, there are a multiple combinations of items belonging to the four dimensions. Despite this large spectrum of possibilities, our data sample contains only one review with at least one item from each of the four realms. This review has the following combination of items:

- Educational: *“... The distilling process was carefully explained and then we were treated to tasting various vintages of cognac...”*  
(cicero50, 09/14/2015)
- Entertainment: *“... Both visits showed the legacy and tradition of families producing cognac...”*  
(cicero50, 09/14/2015)
- Esthetic: *“... Jean-Luc... drove us to some interesting towns and landmarks of the region...”*  
(cicero50, 09/14/2015)
- Escapist: *“... At the first distillery... we were fortunate to witness the crushing of the first picking of grapes for 2015...”*  
(cicero50, 09/14/2015)

## 5. Discussion

In light of these results, the education and entertainment dimensions represent 90% of the references. However, the references related to the esthetic dimension are rather rare, and those related to the escapist dimension are practically lacking in the consumers' evaluations. This general observation illustrates that the existing tourism offers in the Cognac area mainly focus on the absorption side of the experience, either passive or active, and thus neglects the immersion aspect. In line with this general finding, we can draw some meaningful conclusions by considering the esthetic and escapist dimensions more thoroughly.

The esthetic dimension represents almost 10% of the references. In previous academic works, the esthetic dimension was depicted by three items “well-tended wine bars and shops,” “road signage and information,” and “wine-dominated landscape” (Pikkemaat et al., 2009). However, as Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012) suggest, these three items undoubtedly do not fully describe the esthetic dimension in the experience economy. It is necessary to propose a broader vision of the esthetic dimension. In this study, the cognac country environment includes many other natural elements and manmade visual improvements. As an example, tourists strongly value the winescape and the typical architecture and heritage of the Cognac region. The results confirm that the esthetic dimension has a broader scope than revealed in previous academic works. Moreover, in line with prior studies (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Oh et al., 2007; Pikkemaat et al., 2009; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013), the esthetic dimension indisputably influences the experiential outcomes.

Consistent with Bosangit's (2011) work analyzing the discourse of travel blogs, escapism stories are very limited. In concrete terms, the escapist dimension in our sample includes only six references, all positive and related to the experience of visiting vineyards. On the one hand, this result could be due to the limitation in terms of the depth of reviews used for the analysis. On the other hand, this provides evidence

that visiting vineyards is not sufficiently established in the current offer, despite the great value tourists traditionally give to active involvement during a visit. A logical explanation is that the escapist dimension has not been clearly defined and measured for effective destination management (Oh et al., 2007). An additional argument by Oh et al. (2007) states that the escapist experience is probably one of the most frequently listed consumer motivations in tourism research. Traveling is generally a way for people to escape their daily lives and experience something extraordinary. Even if this realm is well emphasized in previous academic contributions related to the wine tourism experience, visitors to Cognac do not mention this dimension frequently. Furthermore, contrary to the Quadri-Felitti and Fiore's (2013) results, escapism experience appears to be relevant in generating positive evaluations in the present study.

Obviously, the relative weight of each experience dimension differs in the context of wine tourism in Cognac. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of previous studies. Oh et al. (2007) suggest that the relative importance of the four experience dimensions should be understood rather flexibly. When implementing tourist marketing strategy, each company or destination emphasizes each realm to differing degrees. In the particular case of wine tourism in Cognac, it is evident that the education and entertainment dimensions of experience drive focal marketing strategies. While the esthetic and escapist dimensions are not incorporated in the current offer effectively, this conclusion points out that the visiting packages are not sufficiently diversified. The scarcity of reviews on the richest experience also confirms this observation. Instead of diversifying, competitors align their offers. Cognac houses under-exploit the natural resources of the wine-scape by neglecting visitors' immersion and active participation. Offers that stand out thanks to their immersive and participative nature provide visitors with an excellent experience.

In this study, we mobilized the “sweet spot” concept to capture the richest experience. Compared to previous works (e.g., Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012, 2013), this concept encompasses the aspects of all four realms in order to have a holistic view of the wine tourism experience. Although the optimal experience is rare, this study shows its existence, whereas Oh et al.'s (2007) work did not validate this finding. Additionally, in agreement with earlier studies in tourism (e.g., Pikkemaat et al., 2009; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013), the empirical results of this study support the experiential model popularized by Pine and Gilmore (1998). In fact, the verbatim of the data corpus all identify one of the four realms. In other consumption contexts, this theoretical formulation offers a critical lens for exploring experiences. For example, Seo's (2013) conceptual study reveals that engagement with eSports provides consumers with a multidimensional experience and that the richness of an experience is the degree to which all four realms are incorporated. Sands, Oppewal, and Beverland (2015) explore two dimensions of the 4Es model and show that both education and entertainment-focused events can be used within the retail setting to improve store satisfaction. Our research goes beyond previous studies concerning tourism or other consumption contexts by empirically highlighting the relevance of the holistic analysis and the “sweet spot” concept of Pine and Gilmore's (1998) framework.

## 6. Conclusion, implications, and further research directions

This research has three main theoretical contributions. First, the study states the relevance of the holistic analysis and “sweet spot” concept of Pine and Gilmore's (1998) framework. The latter may be used in other consumption contexts particularly related to experience-focused settings. Second, after an in-depth analysis of previous qualitative and quantitative academic studies, this study proposes an integrative conceptual framework to examine the wine tourism experience. Third, the empirical results enrich the conceptual framework and provide a more extensive description of each of the four dimensions. The following items emerge from the verbatim analysis and

additionally enrich the revised conceptual model: the role of the guide and reception staff (Education), the service and product prices (Entertainment), and the typical architecture (Esthetic).

This empirical study provides evidence that the 4Es model can be used on the one hand as an instrument for wine destination diagnosis and evaluation, and on the other hand as a useful tool to for wine destination management.

When assessing the relative importance of each realm, the results reveal the power of the conceptual model as a diagnosis instrument. The important weight of the educational and entertainment dimensions shows that competitors align their strategy emphasizing, these two dimensions. The low diversification level of visiting packages could be valuable information for different kinds of operators who must make the best use of limited resources (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). Therefore, the 4Es model may be a relevant tool to evaluate the diversification level of wine offers proposed by various tourism operators in the same destination. Even if the entertainment and education dimensions have an overall substantial significance in the current offer, Cognac Houses still neglect some important items. As a reminder, visitors' evaluations hardly mention having experienced concerts in the cellars, music in the vineyards, festivals, gastronomy - wine events, or cooking classes based on cognac. Although these sub-dimensions are highlighted in the literature, in the present study, they are practically missing. Consequently, the low variety of the existing offers focuses mainly on the absorption side of the experience, whether active or passive. This needs to be reinforced by the immersive side of the experience in order to offer a “sweet spot” to potential visitors. For example, Camus House succeeded very well in its differentiation strategy with its proposition of cognac making workshops combining active participation and absorption. For the other cognac producers, it would be essential to find differentiating offers highlighting the escapist and esthetic dimensions. This implication is in line with previous studies emphasizing the dominance of the esthetic experience in predicting positive memories and destination loyalty in the wine tourism context (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). Moreover, accomplishing an esthetic or escapist experience is conceptually largely associated with a state of flow (Oh et al., 2007).

As a destination management tool, the findings provide useful information for destination marketing organizations that strive to brand their cities as wine tourism destinations (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Cognac tourist professionals could support their offer's competitive differentiation with a larger variety of visiting packages, including activities such as concerts, grape harvesting time, exhibitions, festivals, cooking workshops and craft seminars based on cognac, typical accommodation, and so on. In particular, it would be essential to diversify offers related to the escapist dimension with activities such as hiking or cycling in vineyards, ballooning over vineyards, horseback riding, and carriage tours in vineyards.

In addition, it would be preferable to analyze each part of the holistic wine tourism experience to better understand the complete touristic circuits. A complete visit should include all of the 4Es in different proportions, depending on the desired degree of strategic differentiation. This type of inclusive offer could extend the visiting journey's duration and benefit all actors within the same territory.

Visitors seem to appreciate all-inclusive wine tourism packages that include visits, catering, accommodation, and immersive activities. This differentiation strategy strongly encourages visitors to return repeatedly and to refer others, which would create a priority compared to rather similar visiting packages. Moreover, in the specific context of the city of Cognac, several brands (Cognac Houses) are located in the same territory. This differentiation policy could reinforce the territorial attractiveness and competitive advantage of these brands.

Another wine destination-specific tool that could reinforce territorial attractiveness is tight collaboration between the different tourism stakeholders in the cognac area: large cognac houses, small producers, restaurants and hotel managers, tour operators, distributors, and local

tourism institutions. The verbatim analysis reveals a coordination problem between these different actors. Stakeholders could work together and create synergies in the offering, pricing, communication, and distribution strategies.

In terms of pricing, the results show a rather negative feeling due to the differentiated pricing strategy practiced in cognac houses' wine shops and in the alternative distribution channels. Indeed, the pricing policy could be a constructive collaboration field between cognac tourist professionals and other stakeholders to avoid visitors' negative perceptions of the experience.

The communication policy, and in particular signage, information about attractions, and opening hours are not detailed or do not converge through different communication supports. While the perceived importance of these items is very high, visitors had negative perceptions of this missing information. All communication channels, online or offline, should share real time and exhaustive information about tourist visiting opportunities.

This research highlights a twofold contribution of the netnography method. On the one hand, this method is very relevant in the analysis of the consumer experience because it is naturalistic, unobtrusive, and objective. On the other hand, netnography has not yet been used to analyze the wine tourism experience, whereas the results confirm that it is very well adapted to this research theme. Moreover, this method allows researchers to exploit a very rich and freely accessible corpus of data.

The main limitation of the study relates to the low generalizability of the results, although the study confirms the applicability of the model in a wine destination context. Future quantitative research should focus on developing more detailed measurement scales for each of the four dimensions. In addition, this study did not consider the social and demographic characteristics of wine tourists. Another avenue for future research is a comparison of the four realms model for different consumer segments. An additional limitation of this work might lie in the nature of the data collected in terms of the depth of reviews for each realm. Indeed, visitors potentially experienced the “sweet spot”, but did not report it in their reviews.

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